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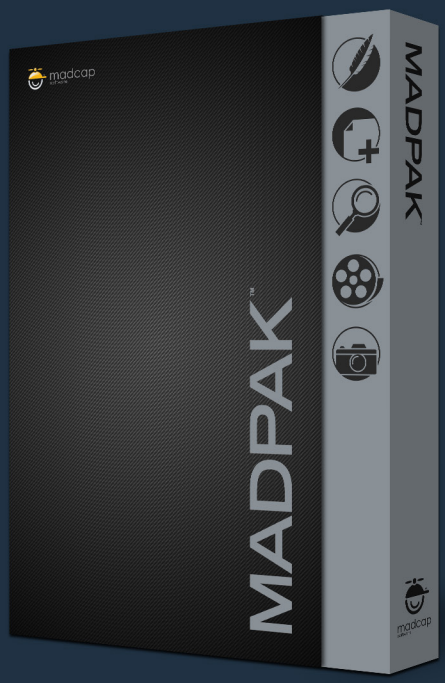

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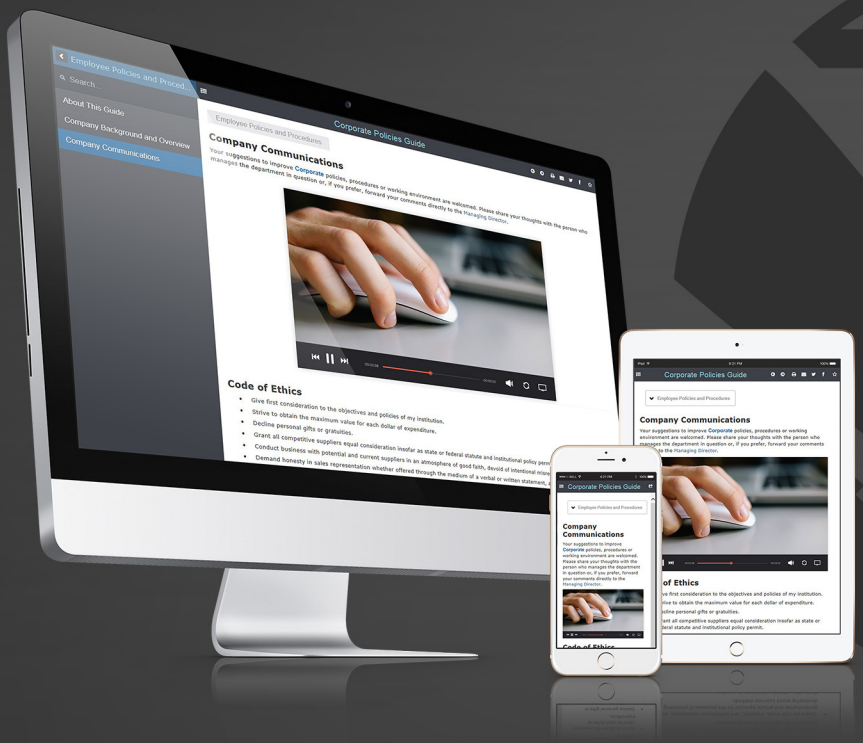

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COMMUNICATION TRENDS

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By Tom Johnson
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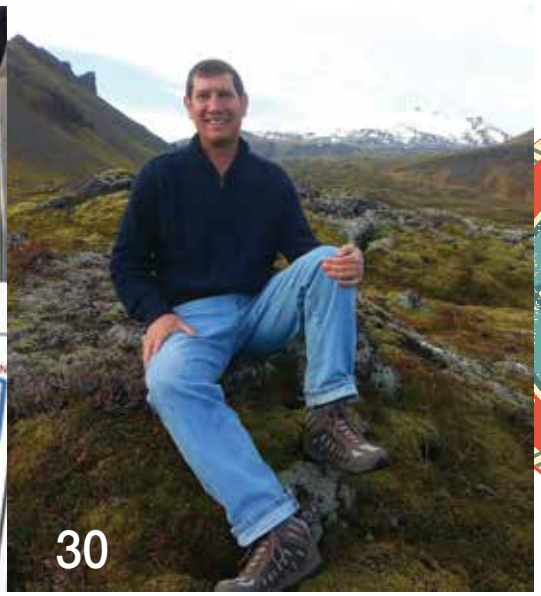
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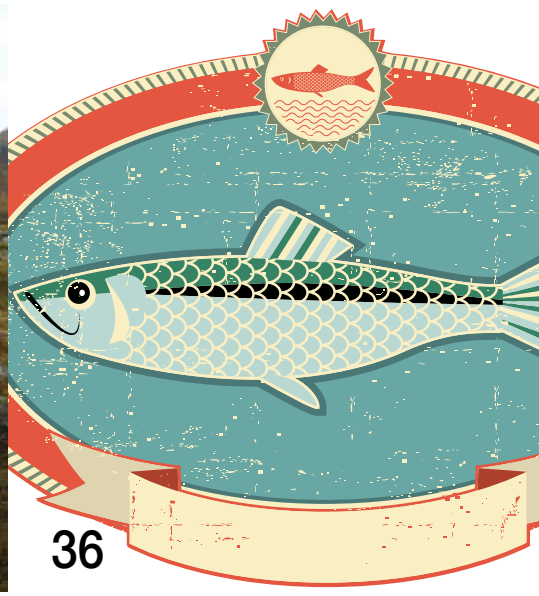
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A Note from the Editor

THE SECOND ISSUE of *Intercom* in 2016 focuses on trends in communications. By kind permission, Tom Johnson, an avid blogger at *http://idratherbewriting.com/*, agreed to let me publish his list of technical writing trends and predictions for 2016. They include a ripple effect from the growth of APIs and increased adoption of new tools like Swagger and Markdown.

Also in this issue are two blog posts by Summit Keynote Speaker David Rose on the Internet of Things and Enchanted Objects. The Summit is taking place in Anaheim, CA, 15–18 May 2016. If you like his thoughts on these trending topics, consider attending the Summit to hear him speak in person!

Also from the STC Summit, Conference Committee Chair Todd DeLuca and Program Manager Jamie Gillenwater have written an overview of the topics that emerged from reviewing nearly 300 conference proposals. Topics that are trending include government documentation, software and technology, academia and higher learning, translation and localization, scientific bodies, and more. The most popular themes were globalization and technology.

And related to globalization and international technical communication, Kirk St.Amant has written an article that summarizes five principles of research in culture, communication, and design. His article explains what the growth of global markets means for technical communicators who are increasingly conducting or reviewing research on other cultures. His five principles will help communicators understand how to influence the effectiveness and applicability of research with international audiences and users.

In the ever-popular topic of writing and editing, Bradford Connatser has prepared the second part of his study on noun strings. He offers practical advice for how to repair noun strings and how to educate authors to avoid using them in technical discourse.

The February Society Pages feature an update from the new *Technical Communication* editor, Dr. Sam Dragga; an article on transportation options in Anaheim; and a reminder of STC's Corporate Value Program benefits. Both Scott Abel and Nicky Bleiel have contributed meaningful columns—one on a change agent in publishing and the other on presentation tips (just in time for Summit!). This issue also brings back Witful Thinking, with a humorous piece by Geoff Hart.

As always, send me your submissions, comments, or feedback at the email below.

—Liz Pohland
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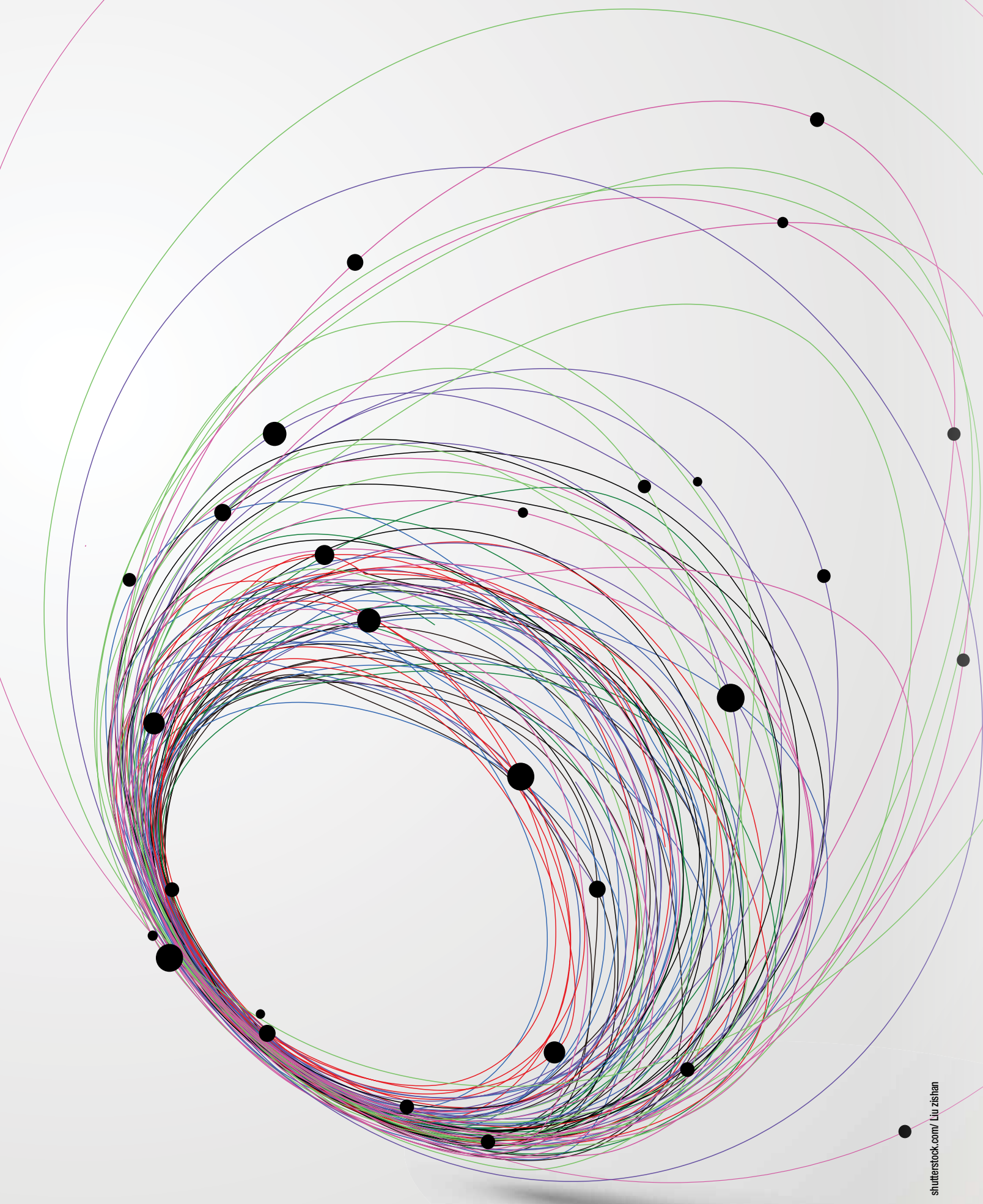

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2016 Technical Writing Trends and Predictions, or the Ripple Effects of API Growth on Technical Writers

By TOM JOHNSON | *Senior Member*

IN 2016, THE CONTINUED GROWTH of APIs will create a ripple effect across the technical writing community that involves a variety of changes. Some of these changes include an increased adoption of Swagger, Markdown, revision control, learning programming, authentication solutions, Write the Docs Meetups, new authoring tools, tutorials, API-based CMSs, and more.

About Trends Articles

I have often wondered why articles about "trends" tend to get massive readership, and I think I finally understand. One reason we read about trends is because we want to know whether our skills are evolving to match the changing technology landscape, so that we'll feel comfortable and secure in the future of our jobs. If we find that technology is changing more rapidly than we can process, we might need to reorient our skillset, adjust our job functions or focuses, or alter our career direction to better align with the demands of the market.

But trends articles are a mixed bag. For trend lists to be interesting, writers have to go beyond the obvious to explore some new, unthought-of angle about the future. Those kinds of far-out predictions tend to be amusing but unfounded. For example, I highly doubt you'll be riding to work in your driverless car while coding on a large holographic computer screen, using your hands to manipulate objects like in *Minority Report* while your wearable tech jacket communicates to your doctor a host of data about your health and physical condition (probably that you'll soon die of heart disease from sitting all day).

On the other hand, more conservative predictions about trends for the coming year probably tell you just slightly more than you already know, which is likely disappointing as well. People crave new information and ideas (we're all curious about the future), and there's no better soapbox to evangelize your new ideas than with a trends list, which welcomes grandiose predictions without much backing.

In this trends article, I'll try to avoid both of these pitfalls. I want to start with one main undeniable trend, based on a fact. In this case, the core trend that will act as a starting point is the proliferation of APIs in companies. Based on this core trend, I'll then extrapolate all the ripple effects of the trend on the technical writing community. Basically, as the diagram on page 9 illustrates, the ripple effect of API growth will affect technical writers in a variety of ways.

The Starting Point: APIs, Endpoints, and Device Meshes Grow In Popularity

According to Evans Data (in 2014), about half of the developers worldwide are working on APIs of some kind. Evans Data says: "Of the 18.2M software developers in the world, 1.2M are now publishing APIs for external use ... 4.7M publish APIs that are external but limited to their partners or registered associates.... Not all APIs are published externally, 8.9M developers worldwide publish APIs for internal use only." In other words, about 50% of developers are working on internal APIs. Although only about 7% are working on external APIs, technical writers document both internal and external APIs, so it doesn't matter tremendously who the audience is. That's a lot of engineers working on APIs!

What's driving the rapid development of APIs? "'The Internet of Things and the proliferation of platforms across all industries have led to an explosion in the number of developers publishing APIs externally,' said Janel Garvin, CEO of Evans Data. 'We expect that number to increase proportionately in relation to the population going into the next three years, and not just keep up with projected population growth'" (see Evans Data Corporation).

Gartner reports a similar trend. In their 2016 tech trends, they list the "device mesh" as a top trend: "'The device mesh refers to an expanding set of endpoints people use to access applications and information or interact with

people, social communities, governments and businesses. The device mesh includes mobile devices, wearable, consumer and home electronic devices, automotive devices and environmental devices—such as sensors in the Internet of Things (IoT).… In the postmobile world, the focus shifts to the mobile user who is surrounded by a mesh of devices extending well beyond traditional mobile devices,' said Mr. Cearley.… While devices are increasingly connected to back-end systems through various networks, they have often operated in isolation from one another. As the device mesh evolves, we expect connection models to expand and greater cooperative interaction between devices to emerge" (see Gartner, Inc.).

The device mesh means a large number of objects are connected to each other, so that it's one interconnected techscape of devices, all interacting with your own device as you navigate past them. The device mesh interacts through a set of "endpoints" that allow the different systems to access applications and information. A "set of endpoints" is another way of referring to an API, or application programming interface. An API exposes endpoints to allow other systems to interact with it. Through the endpoints, these external systems make requests for data, and the API returns the requested data. The Web has become a mashup of services that are interconnected through APIs.

How Does This Trend in APIs Affect Technical Writers?

Chances are your company will be developing an API or at least exposing some endpoints for customers to interact with. Your job will be to document the API and its endpoints. Most likely the API you document will be a REST API, since the software-as-a-service (SaaS) model is proliferating more than downloadable libraries. Everything is going online. Additionally, since REST APIs are language agnostic, they're the most understandable kind of APIs out there for technical writers—you don't need to know programming as you do with the more traditional kinds of native library APIs (Java, C++, .NET).

Based on the fact that APIs are growing by leaps and bounds, here are some potential ripple effects on the technical writing community.

1. Use of Swagger with API docs becomes an expectation

You'll want to make your API documentation easy to understand and interactive. To do this, most likely you will describe your API following the Swagger spec, now called the OpenAPI spec (*https://github.com/OAI/OpenAPI-Specification*). The Swagger spec will allow you to publish your documentation in an interactive way that allows developers to quickly see the parameters in the requests and the responses. More importantly, Swagger will allow developers to try out the endpoints for themselves (inside your documentation) and see the exact format of the requests and responses.

The Swagger specification (as well as other specifications, such as RAML or API Blueprint) will also facilitate the discovery of your API by larger systems and allow you to plug into more robust and standardized tooling for your API.

Many development shops will realize that building everything from scratch isn't so cost effective when developing APIs. As a result, API developers will plug into API management platforms like Mulesoft, Apigee, or Apiary to provide the security, licensing, authorization, access, SDKs, and other needed components for their API. These platforms leverage specifications like Swagger to provide some of the coolest interactive interfaces for API docs.

2. Markdown as an authoring format gets taken more seriously by the tech comm community

As you work with engineers who are developing APIs, you will be immersed in engineering cultures that are choosing to embrace Markdown more than XML. Most of the specifications mentioned in the previous section also allow Markdown, as do other API-doc tools.

Since API documentation at times contains highly technical material that is most suitable to be authored by engineers themselves, engineers will opt for solutions that involve Markdown instead of XML. These same engineers are often the ones building the tools that writers use, so their preferences will help drive the adoption of Markdown. You can see this, for example, with *readme.io*, which was created by a developer/designer for API doc and uses Markdown.

In short, if developers are collaborating on docs, you will likely adopt tools that developers prefer. (Note that Markdown isn't the only format developers prefer. Asciidoc is popular for those using Asciidoctor, and reStructuredText (RST) is popular for those using Sphinx and *Readthedocs.org*. Both Asciidoc and RST use wiki-like syntax for producing HTML from text file formats. I only singled out Markdown because I think it's more widely known and has tremendous momentum, especially if your content is in Github.)

3. GitHub as a collaboration platform rises in popularity among tech writers

As you get immersed in API documentation and developer workflows, one developer utility that will likely see more prominence among the technical writing community is GitHub. Instead of purchasing a component content management system (CCMS) for hundreds of thousands of dollars and converting all your content to DITA XML in order for the CCMS to process it, we'll see a rise in version control systems like GitHub and Bitbucket as a means of interaction and collaboration among technical writers (not just among developers).

Although GitHub and Bitbucket are designed for developers, if you're authoring in text files (especially using Markdown) and collaborating with engineers, it will be a

natural fit to plug into their same version control systems. These tools allow technical writers to further close the gap between themselves and engineers—you'll be living in the same world. (To read more about GitHub with tech comm, see Anne Gentle's blog post "Why use GitHub as a Content Management System?".)

4. Write the Docs Meetup groups proliferate

Another trend emerging is participation in Write the Docs Meetups. Write the Docs (*www.writethedocs.org*) is free and tends to include technical, developer-oriented technical writers (including engineers doing technical writing). The group is agile and can pivot to adjust to the latest trends.

When you want to talk shop about static site generators, API documentation, and other developer platforms, you'll find a vibrant community in Write the Docs.

5. Security paranoia forces authentication of docs

Wiring up everything to the Internet creates a new wave of security vulnerabilities, especially for products that can result in actual death. *WIRED* magazine says that from automobiles to pacemakers, sniper rifles to baby monitors, anything that includes wifi can be hacked, and these security vulnerabilities can result in user deaths.

WIRED's Andy Greenberg and Kim Zetter write about the dangers of wifi in the automobile industry: "Security researchers Charlie Miller and Chris Valasek forever altered the automobile industry's notion of 'vehicle safety' in July when they demonstrated for *WIRED* that they could remotely hack a 2014 Jeep Cherokee to disable its transmission and brakes (see Greenburg and Zetter).

The security vulnerabilities associated with the Internet of Things will renew and reinforce paranoia among companies to keep documentation about how to access and configure their APIs behind closed doors. Documentation will require secure authentication, especially for markets where a hacker can do real damage.

At the same time, the increased need for visibility and thought leadership online will require companies to establish themselves on the web through content marketing and other publishing activities. Now more than ever users are turning to Google for information about everything, and if you're not there, your company won't be visible.

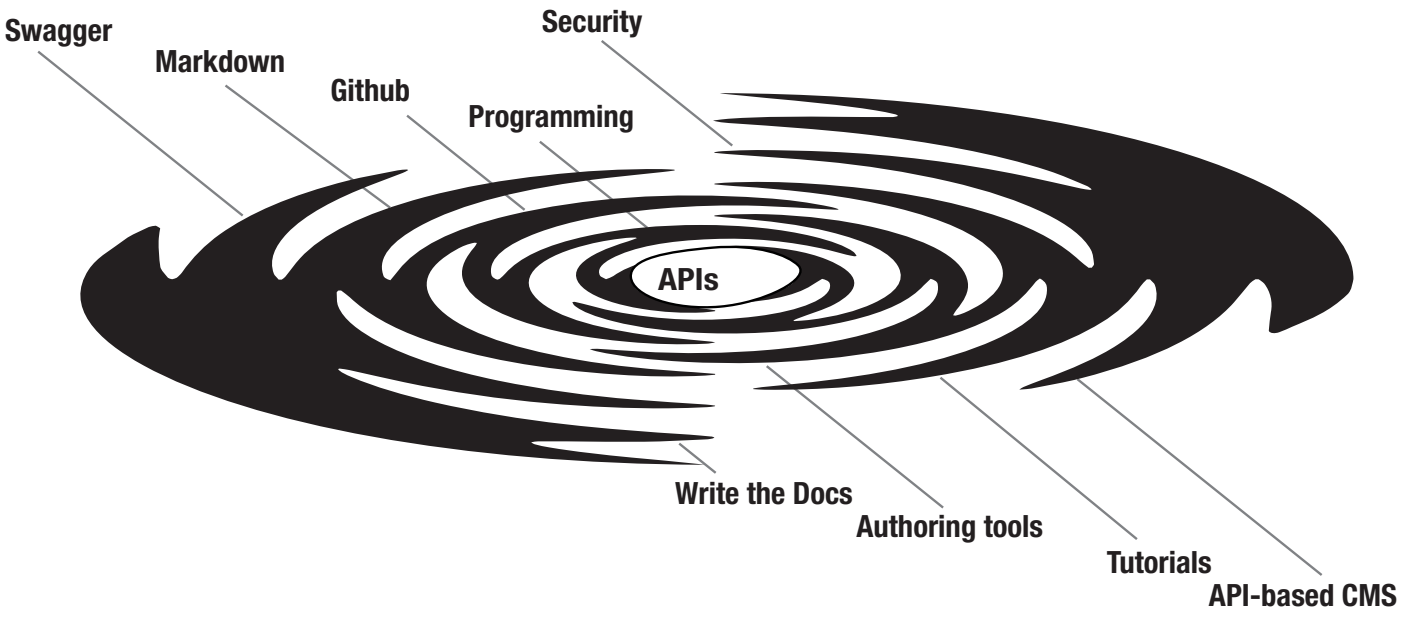
6. Tech writers explore non-traditional tools instead of HATs

As technical writers start documenting APIs, they'll start looking at a lot of API doc sites for examples. They'll meet with UX designers who may suggest the most usable ways to present reference topics that show the endpoints, parameters, sample requests, sample responses, and so on.

In this new landscape, more technical writers will explore non-traditional tools, such as static site generators and other sites such as *readme.io, readthedocs.com*, Sphinx, Corilla, and Asciidoctor, which give them more flexibility to design powerful user experiences.

Since API docs are essentially the user interface for products, technical writers will work hand-in-hand with UX designers to deliver modern, user-friendly websites. The tripane site-in-a-box output from traditional help authoring tools will be pushed aside for more contemporary UX tools.

Note that there won't be a massive migration to new tools. Technical writers cannot make tool changes very quickly given the enormous difficulty of moving legacy documentation from one format to another and the steep requirements technical writers usually have for content re-use, single sourcing, and multichannel outputs. But there will be more interest in Web tools that give technical writers greater flexibility and power to document Web APIs in modern ways on the Web.



7. Technical writers create more tutorials (instead of just tasks)

The shift to API documentation doesn't necessarily mean a complete paradigm shift for technical writers. Sarah Maddox notes that API writing isn't that different from regular technical writing: "The writing side isn't all that different from user-focused technical writing. You're telling people how to use something. In this case, it's an API or SDK or other tool" (see Maddox). However, rather than producing documentation that consists of small, independently chunked tasks (which has dominated the thinking of technical writers for the past two decades, especially with the rise of DITA), technical writers will create more *tutorial-based content*, because the task-based model for tech docs doesn't necessarily fit API docs.

With APIs, developers have a list of endpoints they can call to get specific information. Your main job in documenting an API is to explain the types of information users can retrieve, and how to specify the requests.

Endpoint documentation doesn't necessarily fit the task-based model. The variety of ways users can leverage the information into their own applications exceeds the simple 1-2-3 steps of tasks that are more common in software interfaces.

Users will still need handholding to understand how to get the API keys, how to construct a request, how to use an SDK, and more. But this sort of information will fit better into a tutorial—similar to a Hello World Tutorial or Getting Started Tutorial—than a standalone task.

8. Technical writers study at least one programming language

Although REST APIs don't necessarily require you to know a programming language, when you write for developers, usually some programming language (whether it's Java, JavaScript, Python, or something else) becomes important to know.

As a best practice, most companies provide reference implementations or sample apps that show a basic integration of their API with a specific platform. For example, take a look at Parse's documentation for various platforms (*https://parse.com/docs*). If you just provide the API and nothing else, you put a lot of burden on developers to figure out the specifics for their own platform.

As technical writers try to get a foothold in the developer doc world, they'll turn to online courses to learn a programming language related to the project they're working on. This learning will not only build their confidence with the product, it will also encourage more integration into the developer's environment and mindset.

9. Technical writers deliver content via APIs themselves

As technical writers interact with APIs, explaining how to retrieve data and integrate it into Web applications, technical writers will become curious about delivering some of their own doc content through an API. In a post on my blog, I provided a basic approach to rendering your content as a JSON file that can be consumed through JavaScript inside an application interface (see Johnson).

Contentful (*www.contentful.com*) is an actual API service to manage your content. According to their site, Contentful is "a content delivery backend with a RESTful JSON API, plus a Web app for managing the content" (see *www.contentful.com/developers/docs/*).

In the demo tutorial, Contentful shows a sample request to return some content:

curl 'https://cdn.contentful.com/spaces/developer_bookshelf/entries?access_token=0b7f6x59a0&content_type=book'

This request (which you can run in your terminal—try it) returns the following JSON object:


```
{
  "sys": {
    "type": "Array"
  },
  "total": 2,
  "skip": 0,
  "limit": 100,
  "items": [
    {
      "sys": {
        "space": {
          "sys": {
            "type": "Link",
            "linkType": "Space",
            "id": "developer_bookshelf"
          }
        },
        "type": "Entry",
        "contentType": {
          "sys": {
            "type": "Link",
            "linkType": "ContentType",
            "id": "book"
          }
        },
        "id": "5PeGS2SoZGSa4GuiQsigQu",
        "revision": 1,
        "createdAt": "2015-12-08T15:45:54.394Z",
        "updatedAt": "2015-12-08T15:45:54.394Z",
        "locale": "en-US"
      },
      "fields": {
        "name": "An introduction to regular
expressions. Volume VI",
        "author": "Larry Wall",
        "description": "Now you have two problems."
      }
    },
    {
      "sys": {
```

```
        "space": {
          "sys": {
            "type": "Link",
            "linkType": "Space",
            "id": "developer_bookshelf"
          }
        },
        "type": "Entry",
        "contentType": {
          "sys": {
            "type": "Link",
            "linkType": "ContentType",
            "id": "book"
          }
        },
        "id": "2CfTFQGwogugS6QcOuwO6q",
        "revision": 2,
        "createdAt": "2015-12-08T15:45:17.684Z",
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        "name": "How to manage content in a develop-
er-friendly manner",
        "author": "Contentful",
        "description": "Make an API request, get JSON
in return."
      }
    }
  ]
}
```


You would then use JavaScript to display parts of the JSON that you want on your Web page.

Contentful also allows you to create and update content, deliver previews, download assets, and more.

By storing the content on an API server in the cloud and allowing applications to download the content they need, Contentful allows for multi-channel delivery across any number of sites and platforms, essentially replacing the need for a content management system.

I doubt Contentful will gain early traction in the tech comm market any time this year, but the idea of delivering user interface content (such as tooltips or interface tutorials) through a JSON file is something that is going to grow in popularity. I delivered UI content using Jekyll and a method I've described on my blog, and I found it incredibly effective (see *http://idratherbewriting.com/documentation-theme-jekyll/mydoc/mydoc_help_api.html*). I was able to single source the definitions from my main documentation help into both the JSON file (used for UI tooltips) and various documentation pages.

Contentful may have slow adoption in the tech comm community, but it's one of the fastest growing APIs. Take a look at "How SDKs and Community Drove Contentful's 2000% Growth in Two Years" on *Programmableweb.com* (see Boyd).

Contentful's main audience includes media publishers and digital creative agencies, but I think this audience may eventually expand into other markets as well.

Other Trends

Although I focused exclusively on the ripple effects of API growth, there are many other trends I haven't covered here. I'm sure other writers will pick up on them.

When analyzing trends, I recommend that you look at technology trends in general, since documentation tends to piggyback on engineering trends. If there are other ripple effects to API growth that I haven't considered here, please let me know.

If you want some tips on how to document APIs, see my free course, Documenting REST APIs (*idratherbewriting.com/docapis_course_overview*). This is a resource I keep adding to and growing, so keep watching it.

Editor's Note: This article was first posted as a blog online at http://idratherbewriting.com/2015/12/29/trends-technical-writing-2016. *A revised version of the blog post is published here by permission of the author.*

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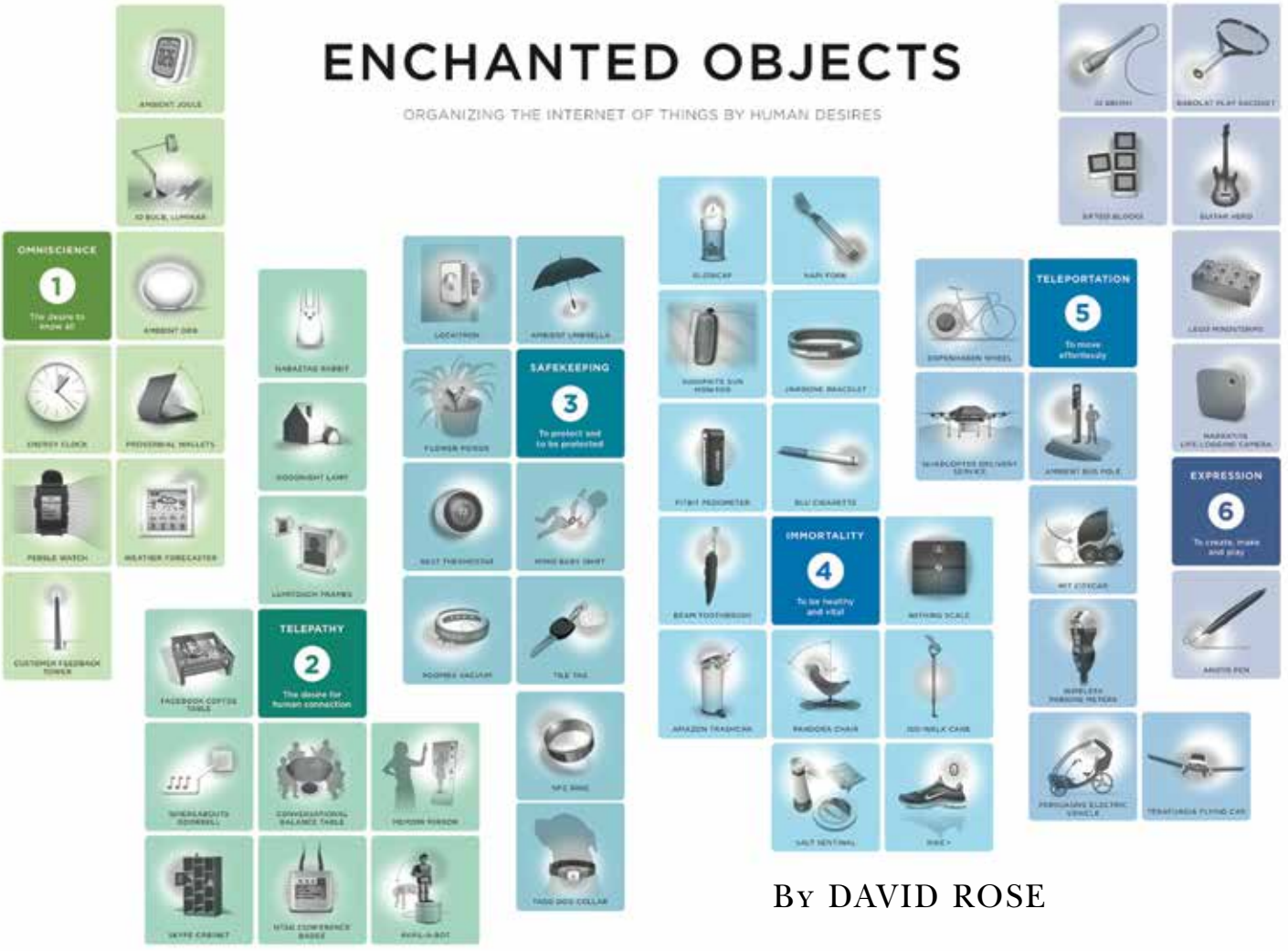
What's Driving IOT AND Organizing the Exploding List OF Enchanted Objects



By DAVID ROSE

Figure 1. A Periodic Table of Enchanted Objects

What's Driving IoT?

I'm often asked, *What will drive the adoption of the Internet of Things?* My answer is three very different industries with three different motivations:

1) Self-funding business models driven by behavioral change

Enchanted objects make data-gathering passive and data-display pervasive. This tends to either accelerate consumption behavior, as in pills or content, or reduce care costs, as in healthcare or the care of capital assets like cars and appliances.

2) Connected hardware companies and telcos who sponsor and promote enchanted objects

Telcos like AT&T, Verizon, Orange, and others measure their success with the KPI of average revenue per user (ARPU). Each new connected thing gives them the ability to increase this metric with new monthly service fees or bundled family plans.

Consumer electronics makers like Samsung, Nokia, and Apple also benefit from enchanted objects because it represents a new product category that people will buy and upgrade in addition, and in parallel, to smartphones and tablets. Witness Samsung's accession of SmartThings.

Notably, neither the telcos nor classic consumer electronics makers participate in advertising revenue, which is growing the coffers of Google, Apple, and Facebook.

3) Product companies craving differentiation

Pity the furniture companies and makers of shoes, hats, kitchen appliances, faucets, lighting, jewelry, etc.. These categories compete purely on commoditized features like color, material, and style. If you are a watch-maker or woman's handbag maker your styles are copied by your competitors before they arrive in stores because the network of manufactures and retail sales reps trade information.

I predict these traditional inert product companies will start to aggressively use crowdfunding platforms like Kickstarter and Indiegogo to test (or copy) ideas for enchanted objects. And you probably won't notice it. They will use covert names to shield their identity and risk to test new ideas and garner early market feedback (think Clarol's covert Origins brand or Budweiser's fake local craft brew RedDog).

Each object meets a fundamental desire in a surprising, magical way. As you look at the wide array of enchanted every-day items, which would most satisfy your own needs?

Google has the most to lose from Enchanted Objects

Resistance to enchanted object adoption will be led by the those who benefit most from ad networks. Most enchanted objects play in the design space of color, sound, haptics, and shape-shifting materials. The ad units simply don't exist for these media. Companies like Google and Facebook who increasingly rely on advertising revenue will find themselves without a stake in the growth of Enchanted Objects.

Organizing the Exploding List of Enchanted Objects

One of the biggest challenges of writing *Enchanted Objects* was organizing the ever-growing list of enchanted objects. Since I argue that we find these objects enticing due to our innate psychological needs, it seemed most logical way to organize them by universal human drives. These drives have animated my own research—they are the fundamental human behaviors that make us tick, and they deserve the primary focus of product designers, technologists, and entrepreneurs.

- *Omniscience*. The desire to be all-knowing.
- *Telepathy*. The desire for human connection.
- *Safekeeping*. The desire to be protected.
- *Immortality*. The desire to be healthy, strong, fully capable, and vital.
- *Teleportation*. The desire to live unconstrained by physical limits.
- *Expression*. The desire to create, make, and play in every form and media.

Using this structure, I worked with Chris McRobbie to make icons out of the 50+ internet-connected things covered in the book–a Periodic Table, if you will, of Enchanted Objects. Each object meets a fundamental desire in a surprising, magical way. As you look at the wide array of enchanted every-day items, which would most satisfy your own needs? Which are the most generally useful? Which are the most groundbreaking? What's the next everyday thing that should become enchanted, or that you will enchant?

Editor's Note: The content for this article is reprinted by permission of STC's 2016 Summit Keynote Speaker David Rose from his blog http://enchantedobjects.com/.

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Top Communication Trends and Topics, as Reflected by the STC Summit

By TODD DELUCA | *2016 STC Summit Chair* and
JAMIE GILLENWATER | *2016 STC Summit Program Manager*

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IF YOU WANT to get a good sense of technical communication trends, add the STC Summit to your spring conference schedule. Each year, the conference committee receives hundreds of proposal entries from across the United States and around the world. These submissions reflect the broad swath of the roles that our members have, the locations where they work, and the various industries and audiences that they serve.

Some of these represented groups include government, software and technology, academia and higher learning, translation or localization, scientific bodies, independent consultants and freelancers, and more. Given this broad representation, you would think there aren't many trends or common themes. Or that the topics are so widespread that it's difficult to see any patterns or trends. But with nearly 300 proposals, quite a few themes emerged that technical communicators want to talk about this year. Two of the most popular themes were globalization and technology.

We Live in a Global Society

Because the Summit received proposals from around the world, international topics are a pattern we continue to see grow. A significant topic area here is the relationships with onshore and offshore teams (case studies, challenges, successes, cultural differences, and working together). This is increasingly important as we work with partners across multiple continents and time zones. These colleagues, customers, and team members represent not just different cultures, but also different roles. If you work with software development, it's not just quality assurance or customer support; it's also developers, managers, editors, team leads, and project managers.

The more traditional topic area related to globalization is localization. Surprisingly, it's not just using tools and structured authoring to help make it easier and cheaper to translate content, though those are still represented. It's also thinking about writing for global audiences (users and customers) using simplified or international English wording and structures that clarifies meaning and increases comprehension. Turns out these best practices help native and non-native English speakers alike. It's clear that if your not looking at the world with a global lens, then you're most likely limiting your opportunities for growth in the future. Fortunately, today's technology and the internet have lowered barriers, which opens many global doors for our members to pass through more often.

Technology Surrounds Us

Speaking of technology, the majority of Summit proposals have some sort of tie or connection to it. And we're not just talking traditional help authoring tools and software either. Heard about virtual and augmented reality? Sure you have, but did you know they're different? We received proposals related to both topics.

And the Internet of Things (or IoT) is pretty big, too. Our keynote speaker, David Rose, will be talking about that. What helps build, fuel, and connect those Internet things? It's the Application Programming Interface (API). You will find this hot topic well covered and represented at the Summit this year. If you work with a software company or in a software environment like many of us do, we have sessions that include development tools and programming languages like Git, Jeckyl, RegEx, and Markdown. Whether you're a novice coder or an experienced developer, we've got it covered.

You might have one or two friends with a mobile smart phone or tablet device, or possibly know somebody who used an app recently. All joking aside, it's obvious that there's a trend with mobile devices and technology. Whether it's preparing new or legacy content, writing for short formats, or defining structures and interfaces to support the different devices, mobile (ironically) is big. And what are people doing on these portable and connected devices? Listening to podcasts, taking courses, and watching videos! We received quite a few proposals in those areas as well from people who prepare, produce, manage, edit, and deliver content in many innovative and new ways. These are exciting times!

Based on what people told us they want to talk about and share with us at Summit, it's clear that technical communicators are supporting, participating, and guiding what's happening in the growing internationalization of the workforce and the rapidly evolving spaces of technology. That's quite fortunate for us. Thusly, we have a strong sampling and mix of topics across this global and technological spectrum represented at the Summit this year.

Sorting It Out

With so many options, how did we choose which ones to select for Anaheim this year? It wasn't easy.

We had an incredible lineup of proposals for the 2016 STC Summit, with topics including API, customer experience, mobile learning, independent consulting, and more. Our review team, which included experts from all walks in the technical communication field, sorted through hundreds of proposals to create an engaging and comprehensive program. It's through their efforts that we are able to bring it to you, so please thank them when you see them in Anaheim this May.

You can imagine that the conference committee, with input and suggestions from track managers and review teams, had their work cut out for them and a difficult time trying to select "the best of the best." They did. Unfortunately, having a limited number of session slots to fill and more solid proposals than we could accommodate made it an even greater challenge. Rest assured that the group has done the heavy lifting for you and put together a compelling mix of content delivered from a qualified set of speakers.

A Sampling of Topics

As we mentioned, the hottest new topic seems to be API documentation, which includes presentations by Marta Rauch, Ed Marshall, and Nabayan Roy, along with video making, with ideas from Matthew Pierce and Li-At Rathbun.

Our customers are also receiving a lot of attention this year as several presentations focus on the customer experience, including "Building Quality Experiences for Users in Any Language," "Customer Experience (CX): Come Join the Party," "Help Begins with the GUI: TC meets R&D," and "An Extreme User-Centric Approach to Kiosk Writing."

Independent contractors and consultants have good sessions to choose from, too, such as Rich Maggiani's "Three Hats of Independence" or "How to Write Contracts and Statements of Work" by Jack Molisani.

In addition to our 45-minute presentation sessions, we are offering workshops before and during the Summit. Pre-conference workshops include hot topics, such as "Documenting REST APIs" presented by Tom Johnson, "Gamifying Writing Skills" by Leah Guren, and "Information Visualization: Seeing Through the Numbers" by Phylise Banner. Popular workshops during the conference will include "The Future of M-Learning and Mobile Help" by Danielle Villegas, "Don't Edit—Teach: Strategies for Mentoring Writers" by Jessica McCaughey, and "Big Data for Beginners: Tools and Methods" by Aimee Roundtree.

These are just some highlights of the great educational offerings you can expect at Summit this year and some the trending areas. For details and a complete list of speakers and topics, please visit the STC Summit website (*summit.stc.org*).

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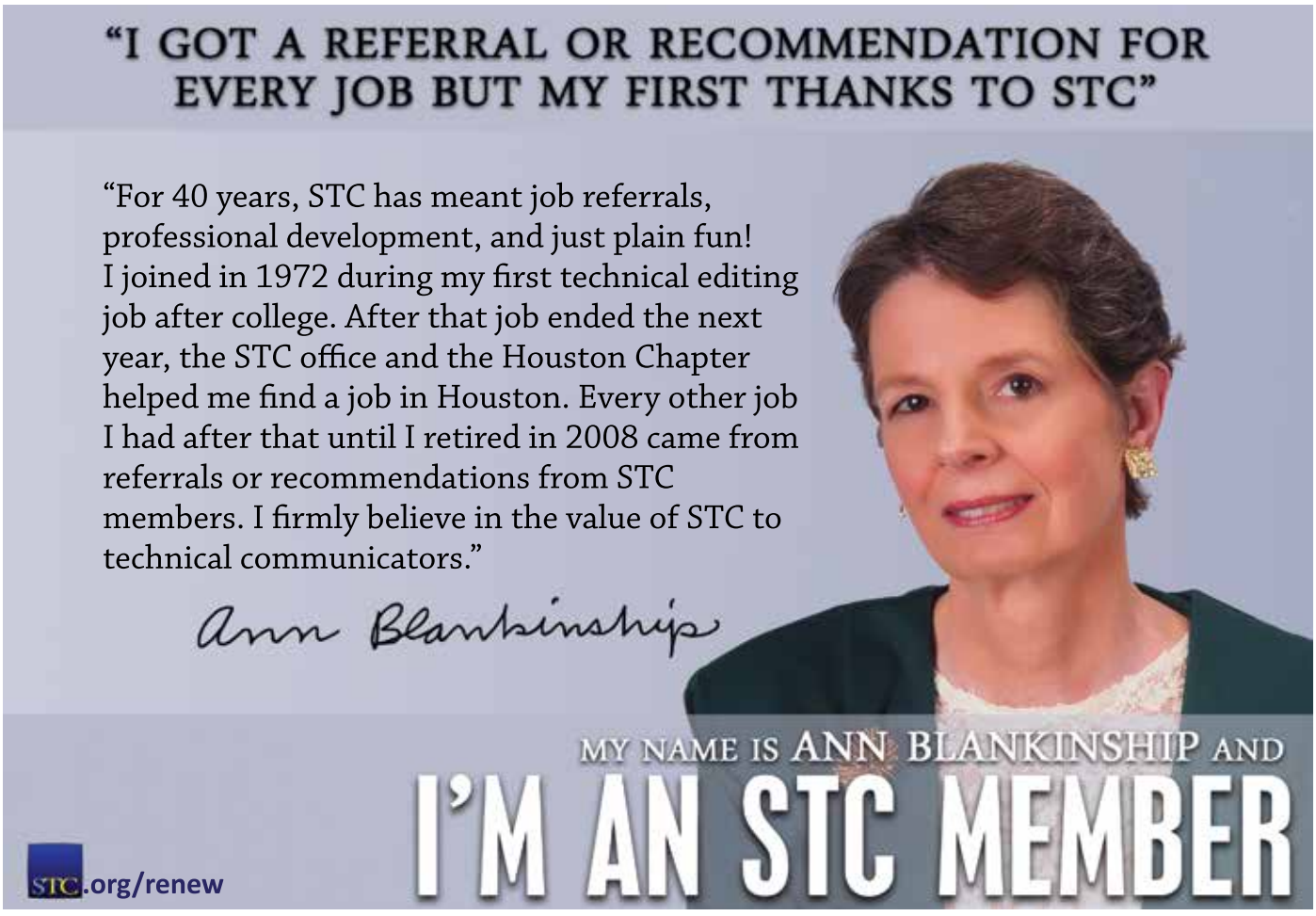
"I GOT A REFERRAL OR RECOMMENDATION FOR EVERY JOB BUT MY FIRST THANKS TO STC"
"For 40 years, STC has meant job referrals, professional development, and just plain fun! I joined in 1972 during my first technical editing job after college. After that job ended the next year, the STC office and the Houston Chapter helped me find a job in Houston. Every other job I had after that until I retired in 2008 came from referrals or recommendations from STC members. I firmly believe in the value of STC to technical communicators."
Ann Blankinship
MY NAME IS ANN BLANKINSHIP AND
I'M AN STC MEMBER
STC.org/renew

THE FIVE PRINCIPLES OF RESEARCH IN Culture, Communication, and Design

By KIRK ST.AMANT | *Fellow*

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THE GROWTH OF GLOBAL MARKETS means technical communicators are increasingly doing or reviewing research on other cultures. This topic area, however, is vast. Doing work in this area, moreover, requires individuals to determine what constitutes effective research on nuanced aspects of culture, communication, and design. The resulting situation can be rather complex. After all, when studying other cultures, researchers must balance their own expectations against those of the culture they are studying. Failure to do so can lead to skewed results and inaccurate ideas and information based on faulty findings.

For technical communicators, this situation involves addressing one central question: *What particular factors must one consider when doing or reviewing research on culture and communication?* This article presents five principles that can help address this question. By considering each of the five, technical communicators can understand key factors that can influence the effectiveness—and the applicability—of research on culture, communication, and design.

Aspects of Culture and Communication

No culture is a single, unified entity (Berry, Poortinga, & Breugelmans). Rather, when researchers talk about "culture," they often mean the *average* behaviors and attitudes associated with the members of a particular group. Thus the *individual* members of a given culture might display behaviors and attitudes that differ from those associated with the culture in general (Sun; Yu, Chan, & Ireland).

Additionally, our native culture provides us with a mechanism for understanding the world around us (Varner & Beamer). It tells us what to pay attention to and how to interpret that which we encounter. As such, we often perceive and attempt to understand other cultures from the perspective of our own. These aspects of generalizability and perception have important implications for how technical communicators conduct and assess research on communication and design in other cultures (Getto & St.Amant). Guidelines that make technical communicators aware of and help them address such factors can lead to more effective research related to understanding aspects of culture, communication, and design.

Principles of Research on Culture, Communication, and Design

Effective research on culture, communication, and design involves understanding the parameters—or the limitations—affecting the research process. These include what data are collected and how; they also encompass how data are reviewed, interpreted, and reported. These ideas, moreover, are not unique to research on culture, communication, and design. Rather, they are central to doing effective research in general.

In research on culture and communication, however, there has been a tendency to accept and use ideas without closely examining the process used to generate them (see, for example, Cardon's 2008 critique of the work of Edward T. Hall). Similarly, there has been a tendency to over generalize how applicable research results might be within the contest of a greater culture (Sun). Technical communicators need to be aware of such factors when doing research on culture, communication, and design. They also need to account for them when sharing the results of such research. The five principles discussed here represent an initial mechanism for identifying and addressing these aspects.

Principle 1: The Principle of Averages

The cultural communication patterns that emerge from the research process are not inherently representative of every single person within a given culture. Rather, they generally represent the *average* behavior patterns observed in certain groups of individuals. As such, research on culture and communication cannot account for the specific behavior of or expectations of a particular individual within a culture. They can only note general behavior patterns observed across the members of a particular cultural group—namely, the specific individuals studied in the research.

Technical communicators should remember that cultural communication patterns identified through the research process—no matter how well executed—do not apply to every individual from the related culture. In fact, certain members of a culture might have individual preferences or expectations that differ—sometimes, markedly—from more general cultural communication patterns. Moreover, the size of the population studied can have important implications for how widespread certain average behaviors might be.

To account for such factors when reviewing research on culture and communication, individuals should pay particular attention to:

- How many persons in a given culture were studied as a part of the research process?
- How widespread an *average* identified pattern of behavior was across the group studied (e.g., was the behavior seen in 9 out of 10 individuals or 6 out of 10 individuals)?

For individuals engaging in original research on culture, communication, and design, the key issues to consider in terms of averages involves:

- Selecting a large enough sample of individuals to determine how general—or average—a particular behavior is in a culture.
- Reporting on the related scope of such *average* behaviors (e.g., the behavior was seen in 9 out of 10 individuals or 6 out of 10 individuals).

By keeping such factors in mind, technical communicators can better determine what constitutes average user expectations in other cultural contexts. In so doing, they must also allow for flexibility to meet the expectations of individuals who might have expectations that deviate from the average.

Principle 2: The Principle of Time

Cultures are not stagnant. They change quickly and often unpredictably—especially in response to technological developments (Rogers). For this reason, any information on cultural behavior should be viewed as a "snapshot" of that particular culture at a given point in time. While some behaviors might remain relatively resistant to change (e.g., basic moral values of good and

evil), others can change quite quickly (e.g., uses of online media to exchange ideas). Such factors have important implications for the materials technical communicators use when doing initial research on culture, communication, and design.

In general, when reviewing the published research on this topic area, technical communicators should always:

- Note the publication date of all reference materials they use.
- Check that dates for research data in a given source (e.g., article or book) were collected.
- Review publication dates of materials listed in an article or a book's "Bibliography," "References," or "Works Cited" section.
- Determine if the subjects who participated in a study on culture and communication have been out of contact with the culture they are seen as representing (if so, for how long?).

Such information, in combination with the topic being researched (e.g., ethical values in business vs. uses of online media to connect to customers) can provide basic criteria for determining how relevant ideas reported in a given source might be. This principle of time is particularly important for individuals using a review of the published research to guide the design of their own original research activities.

Moreover, by reviewing research reporting on the same aspect in a culture over time (e.g., attitudes toward family in business interactions), technical communicators can determine how resilient certain aspects are to change. Such findings can reveal how embedded—or central and resistant to change—particular factors might be within the context of a particular culture.

Principle 3: The Principle of Contact

No researcher (or team of researchers) can make *contact* with all of the individuals in any culture. In some cases, this factor of contact is based on pragmatics. That is, a researcher can only interview, interact with, or observe a limited number of persons at a given time. In other cases, such limitations in contact might reflect social restrictions governing with whom a researcher may interact in a given culture. In some cultures, for example, lower-status individuals—especially outsiders—might be restricted in the contact they can have with higher-status individuals in the culture being studied.

This factor of contact affects how representative the resulting research findings on certain groups might be. In all cases, these contact-related limitations affect a researcher's ability to generalize the communication behaviors they report. The key factors to consider here are:

- With whom did the researcher make contact during the related study/research process?
- How representative were the individuals studied in relation to their overall culture?

In essence, the subjects studied might represent the communication behaviors of the particular group of which they are a part. That group, however, might not be representative of the overall culture being studied. English speakers, for example, might represent a narrow segment of the overall population in certain cultures (e.g., represent individuals of a particular socio-economic background). Thus, research that only included the English speakers in that culture could produce skewed results not applicable to the greater culture being studied. For this reason, when technical communicators read research reports or undertake research on a culture, they should determine how factors of contact could affect the applicability of the research results.

Principle 4: The Principle of Observation

Our native culture provides us with a mechanism for determining what to look for or pay attention to in most contexts (St.Amant; Varner & Beamer). These expectations affect what we can see (or observe) in a given cultural setting. In many U.S. offices, for example, technical communicators expect to have their own computer, their own telephone, their own stapler, their own desk and chair, etc. Such expectations could mean Americans visiting another culture might not readily recognize/observe an office in that culture if such offices do not reflect the expectations of the observer (St.Amant).

This factor means a researcher might only notice (or observe) part of an overall communication process in another cultural context. (In some cases, it might be overlooked completely.) The problem is researchers can only analyze the data they are able to collect. If a cultural observation issue means certain data—or aspects of communication behavior—were overlooked/not seen, then the related results reported could be inaccurate or incomplete. The more data missing due to observational mis-matches, the more flawed the related research findings might be.

For this reason, researchers need to be aware of how their own cultural perspectives might affect their ability to observe behaviors in a different cultural context. From this point, the researcher would need to determine—and note in the reporting of research—how this factor affected the data he or she was able to collect via observation.

The researcher also needs to determine what steps he or she might take to address this factor. In some intercultural research projects, for example, researchers recruit members of the local culture to serve as a part of the overall research team. These individuals then help in identifying (or observing) certain communication behaviors that might be missed by persons from outside of that culture (Dutta & Das).

Principle 5: The Principle of Interpretation

It is one thing to see something; it is another to effectively and correctly understand what we have observed. Just

because we can see or identify something does not necessarily mean we can correctly *interpret* it. Consider, for example, optical illusions in which observers see the same image but have different interpretations of what it depicts (e.g., the famous "faces in vases" illusion). The idea individuals need to remember is observation and interpretation are two different but interrelated aspects of the research process.

In research on culture, communication, and design, the individual's native culture provides the underlying explanation for why humans do things. (Observed behavior: Students raise their hands in a classroom setting. Interpretation of behavior: They want the teacher to grant them permission to speak in that context.) The problem is that researchers could incorrectly interpret the communication activities of other cultures by inadvertently using their own culture as a guide for understanding such actions.

The notion that humans interpret based on what their native culture tells them something means is a factor that can cause communication problems in international contexts. What, for example, does the "thumbs up" (i.e., the clenched fist with the thumb pointing upward) sign mean if used during a conversation? For most Anglo-Americans, this gesture would be interpreted as communicating a positive attitude, or all is good. For observers from other cultures, however, this same gesture would likely be interpreted to indicate a negative attitude, if not an obscene gesture. In this way, one's native culture affects his or her ability to interpret the behaviors observed when doing research on culture and communication.

Addressing aspects of culture and interpretation generally involve two factors. First, the researcher needs to understand and accept her or his ability to interpret what she or he observes is limited by cultural factors. Second, the researcher needs to consider strategies for addressing this factor effectively. As with aspects of observation, one approach is to include a member of the related culture in the research team to assist with the process of interpreting observations (Dutta & Das). Another involves using interviews or focus groups comprised of members of the related culture and asking individuals to comment on (i.e., interpret) what the behaviors observed by the researchers means (Dutta & Das).

Applying the Principles

The five principles discussed here have important implications related to different aspects of research involving culture, communication, and design:

- They provide a mechanism for evaluating existing research to determine how effective or applicable the related results might be.
- They provide individuals planning research projects with factors to consider when designing original studies.
- They can serve as a mechanism for testing—and, perhaps, modifying—existing research (and related ideas) on culture, communication, and design.

By applying these five principles in these ways, technical communicators can effectively use, update, and expand research in the area of culture, communication, and design. They can also help others design materials that more effectively meet the expectations and needs of users in other cultures.

Conclusion

As businesses continue to become global in scope, technical communicators will find themselves doing research on culture, communication, and design. Effective research in this area, after all, is essential to creating effective (and usable) materials for audiences from other cultures. The five principles presented here can help technical communicators effectively engage in such research. Through applying these principles in different contexts, technical communicators can both enhance their understanding of audiences from other cultures and better design materials for users in those cultures.

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Understanding, Curing, and Preventing the Noun String: Part 2

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By BRADFORD R. CONNATSER | *Senior Member*

IN THE FIRST part of this two-part article on noun strings, published in the July/August 2015 issue of *Intercom*, I introduced critical concepts to understanding why noun strings impair the reading process. This article advances the concepts toward a practical process for repairing existing noun strings, as well as educating authors on preventing them.

Three-Step Process of Unstringing

In a noun string, several nouns modify another noun. How can this cause comprehension problems for the reader? Consider the object of the phrasal verb in this sentence (*were based on*): The safety instructions were based on the **military trainee firing range regulations orientation manual.**

Each noun or noun phrase in the string, indicated in bold, is a decoy for the true object, *manual*. As the reader encounters the transitive verb in the sentence, he looks for its object. Is it *military, trainee, firing range, regulations, orientation,* or *manual?* I hope you can see how this example real-world sentence can impair the reading process.

Below is a refresher of the three-step process for correcting a noun string, followed by an example of using the process to improve the reader's comprehension of the intended meaning.

1. Identify it

What is the anatomy of a noun string? There are five typical characteristics:

- First, and most conspicuous, a noun string contains three or more consecutive nouns, sometimes with an adjective in the mix, although occasionally, two consecutive nouns constitute a noun string, such as "forum for economics discussions," which is more clearly constructed as "forum for discussions about economics" or, even better, "forum to discuss economics."
- Second, the last noun of the string is typically the true subject of a verb, object of a transitive verb, or object of a preposition. As objects, noun strings are devils to interpretation. One would expect to encounter an object directly after the verb or preposition, but in a noun string, there are other intervening nouns. The noun stringer treats nouns like adjectives and piles them up to service a primary nominal that he is trying to earnestly explain. Therefore, the primary nominal gets pushed toward the end of the sentence, away from its natural slot.
- Third, the connective tissue (prepositions, conjunctives, and articles), which describes the relationship between the nouns, is missing (implied).
- Fourth, sometimes a verb masquerades as a noun. This noun has verbal thrust that can be put into play upon the rewrite. For example, *estimation* can be transformed into the verbal forms *estimate* or *estimating*.
- Fifth, the true number of a noun may be misrepresented. When a noun is enlisted to serve as an adjective, the singular form of the noun is typically used. However, upon analysis, one may discover that the notion of the noun is plural, and while unstringing the string, the editor can properly represent its plural form.

2. Analyze it

According to *dictionary.com*, analyzing is "to separate (a material or abstract entity) into constituent parts or elements; determine the elements or essential features of." Analyzing a noun string means to determine the meanings and functions of the words *in* the string, as well as the words that are implied. This is sometimes a painful examination because the author does not come attached to the text, and sometimes an editor has to guess the intended meaning. The examination begins with a simple "reflex" test: Does the thing make sense? Some noun strings will be clumsy and impede fluid reading but still make sense. If a noun string doesn't pass this test, then recomposing it will be a chore.

3. Expand and recompose it

You can call it *unstacking, unpacking, unfolding,* or *unstringing,* but repairing a noun string is literally expanding and recomposing a portion of a sentence. Once you figure out how one noun relates to another (in step 2), you can often use prepositions to declare relationships, recover nominalized verbs, correct the backward syntax, restore the proper number of a noun—in effect, reconstituting the intended meaning.

Example of the Three-Step Process

1. Identify

Consider the following sentence, where we encounter a string of four nouns (the red text). All four of these nouns are flat (three operating adjectivally *in some way* and one operating as the recipient of their adjectival smothering). Any string of three or more consecutive nouns is a conspicuous candidate for a pernicious noun string, and these four nouns are exemplary.

The project team developed a surge environment classification scheme.

2. Analyze

Let's analyze the words in this string. They are all nouns, and the first three *apparently* modify the fourth. A subsequent observation is that the object of the verb *developed* is neither *surge*, nor *environment*, nor *classification*. What did the team develop? A *scheme*, which is located at the end of the noun string, as is generally the case.

Also note that one of these nouns, *classification*, has some verbal thrust and is a candidate for conversion to a verb form. In fact, the verb *classify* is transitive and therefore takes an object—it would be good to provide the reader with a verb-object pattern in the place of a clunky noun.

Original
Recomposed
Notes

Examples

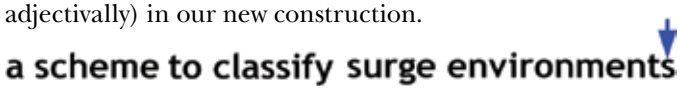
On-site mechanical fabrication detailed electrical interconnections should be reviewed.
The engineer should review a detailed diagram of electrical interconnections for on-site fabrication equipment.
Recovered ligatures and article: of, for, a.
The team released its reliability action plan performance update report.
The team released an update report on the performance of the reliability action plan.
Recovered ligatures and articles: on, of, an, the.
The interest group published an energy storage technology options report.
The interest group published a report on options for energy-storage technologies.
Recovered ligatures: on, for. Restored plural form of noun: technologies.
Assumptions will also impact the secondary circuit loss estimation accuracies.
Assumptions will also impact the accuracy of estimating secondary circuit losses.
Recovered ligature: of. Converted noun (estimation) to verb form (estimating), which takes the object secondary circuit losses. Restored plural form of noun: losses.
Investigators reviewed critical equipment electrical specifications.
Investigators reviewed the electrical specifications of critical equipment.
Recovered ligature and article: the, of. Note that this string could also be interpreted as “the critical electrical specifications of equipment.”
Process equipment manufacturers were invited.
Manufacturers of the process equipment were invited.
Recovered ligature and article: of, the.
Input power and room temperature will be monitored for system performance characterization.
Input power and room temperature will be monitored to characterize system performance.
Converted noun (characterization) into a verb form (to characterize).
LEDSAL fixture manufacturers utilize a range of designs and components.
Manufacturers of LEDSAL fixtures utilize a range of designs and components.
Recovered ligature: of. Restored plural form of noun: fixtures.
How would you classify the employed energy shortfall makeup technology?
How would you classify the technology that the custom power device employs to make up for energy shortfalls?
Recovered ligatures: that, the, to, up, for. Recovered elliptical content words (via interview with the author): custom power device. Converted noun (makeup) to verb form (to make up for). Restored plural form of noun: shortfalls.
Verify the proper power electronic equipment operation.
Verify the proper operation of power electronic equipment.
Recovered ligature: of.
The device prevented most electronic system malfunctions typically attributed to power disturbances.
The device prevented most malfunctions of electronic systems that are typically attributed to power disturbances.
Recovered ligatures: of, that. Recovered phrasal verb: are attributed to.
Wiring and grounding can easily affect mitigation equipment performance.
Wiring and grounding can easily affect the performance of mitigation equipment.
Recovered ligature and article: of, the.
An employee charity giving encouragement program.
A program to encourage employees to give more to charity.
Recovered ligature: to. Converted a gerundive (giving) to verb form (to give) and noun (encouragement) to verb form (to encourage). Restored plural form of noun: employees.
Please use the form to record available mitigation equipment test information.
Please use the form to record available test information on mitigation equipment.
Recovered ligature: on.
The team then submitted the reliability action plan performance update report.
The team then submitted an update report on the performance of the reliability action plan.
Recovered ligatures and articles: on, of, an, the.
The energy storage technology options report guided the next phase of the prototype.
The options for energy-storage technologies in the report guided the next phase of the prototype.
Recovered ligatures and article: for, in, the.
Assumptions will also impact the secondary circuit loss estimation accuracies.
Assumptions will also impact the accuracy of estimating secondary circuit losses.
Recovered ligature: of. Converted noun (estimation) into a verb form (estimating). Restored plural form of noun: losses.
The vagueness of the BT wireless PV monitor module hardware specifications drew criticism.
The vagueness of the hardware specifications for the BT wireless module of the PV monitor drew criticism.
Still ugly, but we recovered ligatures and articles: for, of, the, the.
The client requested an update on renewables program research progress.
The client requested an update on the progress of the research in the renewables program.
Recovered ligatures and articles: of, in, the, the.

3. Expand and recompose

First, let's move the object as close to its transitive verb as possible. Material that intervenes between a verb and its object can prevent phrase collapsing and cause misreading.

Now ask, "What kind of scheme is it?" It's the kind that classifies. Therefore, recover the nominalized verb from *classification* and cast it as an infinitive that modifies *scheme*. We have recovered the verb *classify* and a ligature (*to*) and moved them close to the noun that they modify. Now, what is the object of the verb *classify*? "Surge environment."

Is there only one environment to classify? No. There are many environments to classify. The plural form was hiding in a singular form because when nouns are used adjectivally … you know. So we have restored the proper number to the noun *environments* because it behaves nominally (not adjectivally) in our new construction.



How to Prevent Noun Strings: Unteaching

Educators and professional editors are the vanguard against the noun string. But *unteaching* the noun string is like unteaching someone to cross his arms or interlock his fingers in reverse fashion. When you do a thing a thousand times, you don't think about alternatives. Reflexes are powerful determinants of writing style. Therefore, unteaching requires continual stimulation to compel stringers to think about their syntax.

According to Stanley Fish in *How to Write a Sentence*, there is only one rule to follow: "Make sure that every component of your sentences is related to the other components in a way that is clear and unambiguous." In the July/August 2015 edition of *Intercom*, I talk about teaching and unteaching engineers to write in the workplace (pp. 6–12). Here is a summary of ways to unteach stringers whom you can influence:

- Compose a formal course or presentation on effective technical writing. During formal training, you can present students with many examples of noun strings (perhaps from their own compositions) and ask them to repair them by using the three-step process described earlier.

By unstringing noun strings, technical communicators can become the unstrung heroes of the communication world.

- Provide on-grid sporadic education. During normal work hours, talk to known stringers about the subject.
- Provide off-grid education. Send out writing tips via email, and include periodic lessons on unstringing.
- Provide marginal (stealth) education during review and editing cycles, such as in the margins of Microsoft Word documents.

Conclusion

By unstringing noun strings, technical communicators can become the unstrung heroes of the communication world. But the problem of noun-stringing begins in the university and is indigenous to science and engineering. You won't find noun strings in great numbers in fiction, poetry, journalism, or other non-technical genres, and you generally won't find them in good science communication that is crafted for lay audiences. In good peer-to-peer magazines and journals—ones that sound like journalism—noun strings are uncommon.

One promoting factor of poor writing habits is that higher education takes off the training wheels too soon in technical fields, failing to teach technical people to properly convey their ideas at the sentence level. The noun-string meme may not have originated in the academic chambers of engineering, but it certainly thrives there. In those chambers is where grass-roots efforts to improve sentences should begin—not just the elimination of noun strings, but the correction of many ingrained worst practices. Post-graduation, the goal of the editor is to repair the faulty syntax of stringers and to encourage healthy "sentence-genic" behavior: the facile generation of good sentences. But I sense a complacency among editors, a sort of complicity, even an obedience to the string (evinced by the abiding presence of noun strings in documents that have been professionally edited). I fear that someday, the noun-string meme will breach the blood-brain barrier of those who carry it as an unconscious thing and unknowingly pass it in their DNA to a new generation of English majors. And if this happens, the reader is doomed.

BRAD CONNATSER (bconnatser@comcast.net) *has been writing and editing technical documents for over two decades. He has authored dozens of articles in trade magazines and peer-review journals. Brad taught technical communication and English composition at Temple University, Maryville College, and Pellissippi State. He has served in various capacities in the STC East Tennessee Chapter.*

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The ART of Summit Transportation

BY ART HOFFMANN | *Senior Member*

IN MY PREVIOUS article, I covered the dining and entertainment offerings within the Disneyland sphere of influence. There is much more food and fun outside that sphere, but walking to it all could be daunting. Fortunately, there is a user-friendly option to shoe leather in the form of a streetcar system called ART, or Anaheim Resort Transportation. OK, yes, they are shuttle buses, not iconic streetcars like in the old Rice-A-Roni commercials. You won't have to yell "Stella!" to catch one because two lines stop near the Marriott hotel hosting the 2016 STC Summit.

With the ART, convenience is high and cost is low. A one-day pass is $5, with a reduced price of $2 for senior and disabled passengers. Multiday passes are available to take you around the resort area and a few more distant destinations for 3, 5, and 15 days. The 3- and 5-day passes save $1 per day. A one-way fare is also available. Check the rates and routes on the *rideart.org* website. Several kiosks for purchasing ART passes are located around the Summit hotel and convention complex.

The ART is mobile friendly, too. No, they don't offer WiFi on the shuttles, but you can find out when the next shuttle arrives using your phone. Just text the stop number to 41411 for an ETA.

So where can you go on the ART? For shopping and dining, the ART will take you to the Garden Walk mall just east of the Summit venue, the Outlets at Orange a bit farther out, and South Coast Plaza—one of the premier malls in Orange County. Each of these destinations offers a wide range of dining choices. For a hipster experience, the ART can zip you over to the Anaheim Packing District with its multiple offerings of food, drink, and live entertainment.

If you are going to the Angels-Dodgers game, hop on the ART for a ride to Angel Stadium. The ART can also take you to the Honda Center, home of the Anaheim Ducks. The Honda Center is also a popular concert venue along with the nearby Grove of Anaheim. Check their schedules for performances you might want to see during your visit.

For those wanting to see more of Southern California during an extended stay, use the ART to access the ARTIC, or Anaheim Regional Intermodal Transportation Center (I know, it should be ARITC, but they didn't ask me). From there, board a Metrolink or Amtrak train to Los Angeles Union Station or sunny San Clemente beach.

Once at Union Station, the Red Line subway and other light rail systems will take you to many points of interest around Los Angeles. My favorite is taking the Red Line to Pershing Square station so I can go to the Grand Central Market. The market has been there for 100 years and offers a multitude of wonderful food outlets. Think the Los Angeles equivalent to Faneuil Hall in Boston. Across from one entrance is the historic Angels Flight funicular rail line. Across from the other entrance is the famous Bradbury building shown in many Hollywood movies. Feel free to walk in during regular business hours and picture yourself in Blade Runner.

Here are some links to ART destinations:

- *www.anaheimgardenwalk.com*
- *www.outletsatorange.com*
- *www.southcoastplaza.com*
- *http://anaheimpackingdistrict.com*
- *www.grandcentralmarket.com*
- *www.hondacenter.com/Default.aspx*
- *www.citynationalgroveofanaheim.com*

And some links to transportation information:

- *http://rideart.org/*
- *www.articinfo.com/*
- *http://metrolinktrains.com/*
- *www.amtrakcalifornia.com/*

The Technical Communication Summit is being held 15–18 May 2016.

visitanaheim.org

Ride the ART to Angel's Stadium

ART HOFFMANN lives a few miles from Disneyland and the Anaheim Resort district. Art is the current secretary of the Orange County STC Chapter, one of the Summit's local hosts.

The Value of STC's Corporate Value Program

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TAKE A QUICK look around your office—do you see five or more technical communicators? If so, your company may be interested in STC's Corporate Value Program!

STC's Corporate Value Program (CVP) membership level provides companies the ability to register their technical communication employees as a group in the Society, saving money on membership dues and gaining extra benefits as well. Join organizations like Oracle, Wells Fargo, Boeing, CA, Hewlett Packard, Eaton Corporation, MailChimp, Booz Allen Hamilton, and dozens more.

All CVP individual members (i.e., employees) receive full Classic and certification benefits from STC: discounts on education and certification, online subscriptions to *Intercom* and *Technical Communication*, a copy of the *Salary Database*, and discounts on professional development opportunities. And the organization benefits, too, with:

- A copy of STC's *2014–2015 Salary Database*
- 10% off job postings on STC's Job Bank
- The ability to transfer memberships if an employee leaves the company (e.g., if Joe Smith leaves and is replaced by Jane Doe, you can transfer Joe's membership to Jane)
- Your corporate logo and link to your site on STC's CVP page
- Discounts on marketing, advertising, blast emails, and exhibiting at the Summit
- And other publicity opportunities through STC

You also get one free webinar for every five your company purchases, providing extra savings while you train your employees!

The newest benefit for CVP members is STC's relaunched professional certification program. The STC Certification Commission has re-engineered the program to improve its processes and structure to better serve technical communicators, and members save $245 off the regular certification rate.

"The discounted CVP membership will enable more joining/participation by Oracle writers in general," explained Mari Wozny of Oracle when asked about the program. "My particular department will benefit most from the STC reading materials and webinars."

And while the minimum number of employees required for a CVP membership is five, the more members you join with, the more you save! Membership dues for five to nine members are just $190, a $40 savings per member over the regular Classic membership rate of $225. Ten or more members? Save $45! Twenty-six or more? It's now $55 off per member. And if you join with 51 members or more, dues are just $160 each. (Chapters, SIGs, and other á la carte items can always be added.)

If your company doesn't pay for association memberships, you can still join with a group of coworkers and save. Simply designate one person as the contact person and coordinate one payment through that person. The more people from your company you recruit, the more you save on your own membership as well—and you still get all the extra benefits a CVP membership brings.

STC is happy to speak with your management as well to fully explain the program and how your organization can benefit. With the CVP savings and extra benefits added onto everything the individual Classic members get, the ROI your company receives is tremendous. Wozny stated, "Oracle is committed to driving innovations and improvements across all its organizations. Joining STC is another way to drive awareness of writing trends, etc., along with possible improvements in the technical communication areas within Oracle."

Learn the value of the STC Corporate Value Program. For more information, contact STC's Director of Member and Corporate Engagement Stacey O'Donnell at *stacey.odonnell@stc.org.*

An Update from the *Technical Communication* Journal Editor

BY SAM DRAGGA | *Senior Member*

I HAVE FOUR NEWS ITEMS to share with *Intercom* readers about STC's quarterly research journal, *Technical Communication*.

Article Award

The Conference on College Composition and Communication (the higher education division of the National Council of Teachers of English) will give *Technical Communication* the 2016 award for Best Article Reporting Historical Research or Textual Studies in Technical and Scientific Communication for the article "Dangerous Neighbors: Erasive Rhetoric and Communities at Risk" by Drs. Sam Dragga and Gwendolyn Gong, published in the May 2014 issue. This is a nice recognition of the journal and STC's support of it; CCCC awards typically go to articles in Sage's *Journal of Business and Technical Communication* and *Journal of Technical Writing and Communication* or Routledge's *Technical Communication Quarterly*. Dr. Menno de Jong was the journal editor at the time this article was published.

Cover Competition

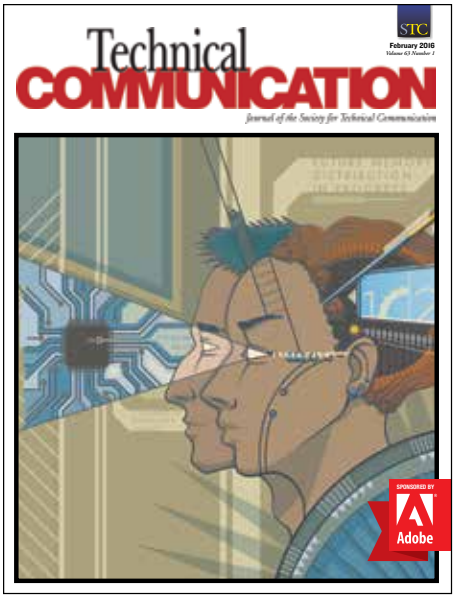
The quarterly competition to create the illustration for the journal's cover is generating growing interest and attention. The February issue's winning cover is a collaborative effort by Benjamin Lauren, Adam Taylor, and Rebecca Tegtmeyer, all of Michigan State University. The May competition on the topic of "Social Media in Technical Communication" has closed, but the August competition is still running with a deadline of 1 April for submissions. This time, "Accessibility and Universal Design" is the topic. Potential illustrations might emphasize ideals and principles of accessibility and universal design, techniques and strategies for implementation, legal and ethical implications, noteworthy successes or failures in achieving accessibility or cultivating universal design, cultural and technological challenges to accessibility and universal design, or unanswered questions and remaining opportunities.

Please submit your illustration (approximately 20x20 cm or 8x8 inches) as a high-resolution (300 dpi) jpg file by 1 April 2016 to *tceditor@stc.org* with a brief explanation (100-200 words) of how your illustration addresses the topic. Submissions will be anonymously reviewed, and a jury of peers will select the issue's cover. Honorable mentions will be published inside the journal.

More information is available at the journal's website at *http://techcomm.stc.org/propose-a-cover-illustration*.

Special Issues

The November 2016 and February 2017 issues of the journal will be guest-edited special issues. Mike Albers of East Carolina University is already working through the proposals submitted on the subject of "Communication of Research Between Academic and Practicing Professionals" for the November issue.



Winning cover for February 2016

Guiseppe Getto of East Carolina University and Huatong Sun of University of Washington Tacoma are accepting 400-word proposals on the subject of "Globalizing User Experience: Strategies, Practices, and Techniques for Culturally Sensitive Design" with a deadline of 15 April. Proposed articles might be on applied research or theory, case histories/studies, tutorials, and/or annotated bibliographies and address a wide array of questions:

- How should technical communicators attend to issues related to user experience within the organizations they work in, and around the products they help deploy, in terms of collaboration, communication, complexity, and change?
- What can technical communicators teach their UX colleagues about cross-cultural and international communication and product deployment?
- How should technical communicators work as user advocates to develop more culturally sensitive design and research methods to address the digital divide between the global north and south?

Upcoming *Technical Communication* Submission Dates:
August 2016 cover competition deadline: 1 April
February 2017 special issue proposals deadline: 15 April

- What expertise do technical communicators bring to informing innovative practices of work and design to develop a more diverse workplace and a more heterogeneous society?
- How do political, legal, economic, and/or technological issues affect the ways that information products are deployed within local cultures?
- How do cultural differences relating to intellectual property and copyright affect technical communication practices—particularly practices involving globally distributed teams?

In your proposal, please include your name, affiliation, and email address as well as a working title for your proposed article. Direct your completed proposal or questions about proposal topics or this special issue to Guiseppe Getto and Huatong Sun at *tc.special.issue@gmail.com*.

Q&A

Finally, I'll acknowledge a failure of mine and that is to generate questions from you about the articles in the journal. I still hope that Q&A will develop as a regular section of the journal, publishing your substantive questions about the articles and allowing authors to answer your questions carefully and thoughtfully. I think this interactive Q&A section would make clear that the articles in *Technical Communication* are intended to stimulate thinking and conversation across the field and across STC. This section would allow authors and readers to engage each other in rewarding extensions and clarifications of the original article that would inform the practice and teaching of technical communication.

I think questions could easily be 100-200 words, and I anticipate answers of 500-1000 words. As you read through the articles in the journal, please consider questions you would like to ask the authors and email your questions to *tceditor@stc.org*.

And, as always, if you have questions about the journal (or praise or criticism), I would appreciate getting your message at *tceditor@stc.org*.

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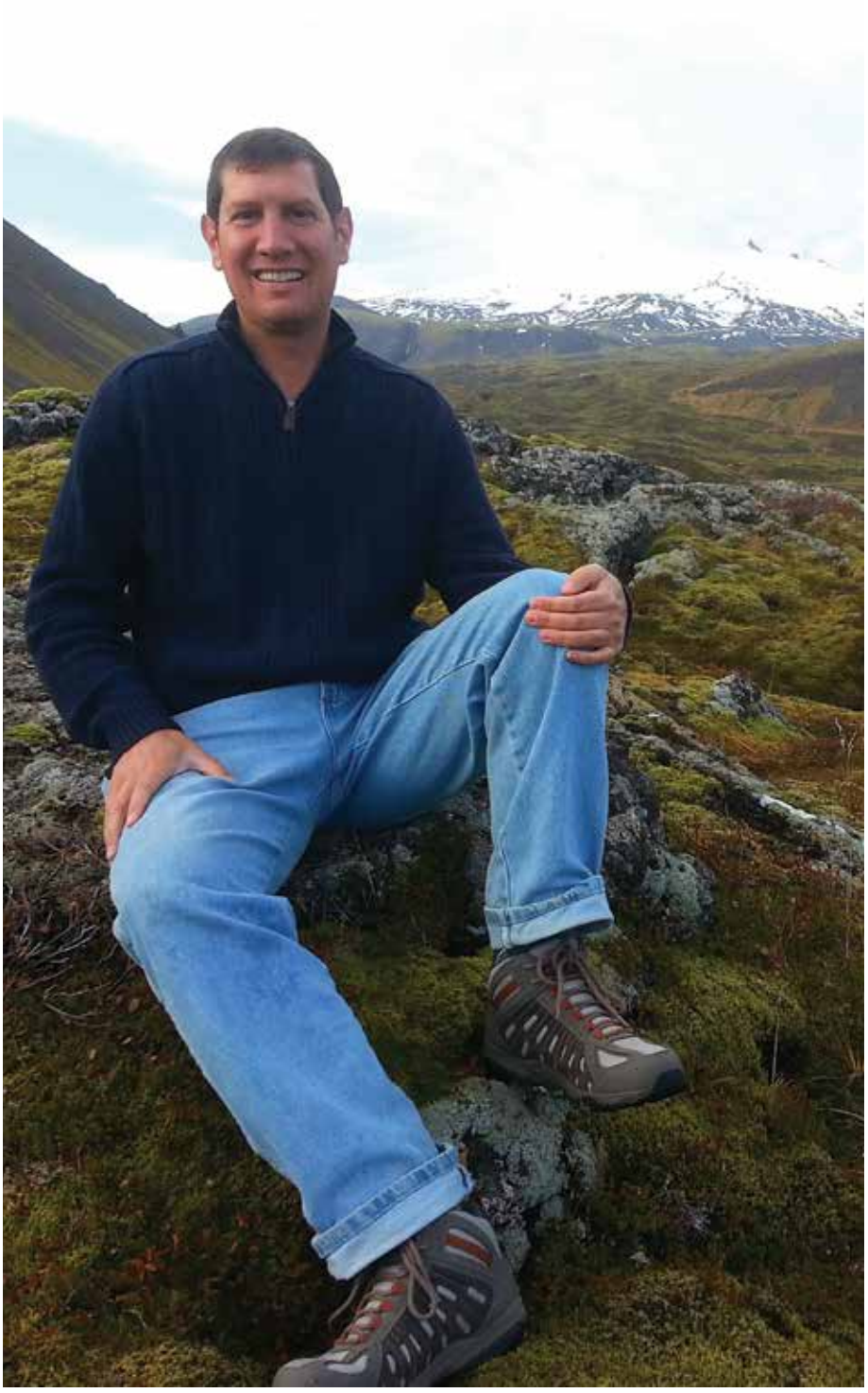
Interview with Joe Gelb on the Future of Publishing Tools



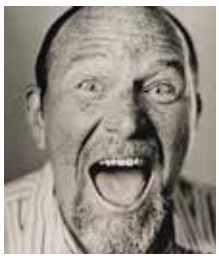
BY SCOTT ABEL | *Senior Member*

Scott Abel: Joe, thanks for agreeing to chat with me today about the future of publishing tools. Before we tackle that subject, tell our readers a little about yourself.

Joe Gelb: It's great to catch up with you, Scott. My background is in mechanical engineering. I also have a degree in history which means that I'm supposed to be an engineer who knows how to write.

One of the first jobs I worked while in school was with McDonnell Douglas. I was tasked with creating applications designed to help engineers write manufacturing instructions. So right from the start, I was drawn to the world of technical documentation.

After school, I got a job for a technical writing company doing custom programming for dictionaries and encyclopedias. During that gig, I fell in love with technical writing. With that company, I rose to the level of Chief Technology Officer. We created all sorts of applications for technical writers like automated conversions to various



In the digital age, change happens quickly. This column features interviews with the movers and shakers—the folks behind new ideas, standards, methods, products, and amazing technologies that are changing the way we live and interact in our modern world. Got questions, suggestions, or feedback? Email them to *scottabel@mac.com*.

help formats and XML Document Type Definitions.

In 2007, I started Suite Solutions with the goal of helping companies around the world make the move to intelligent content. Most recently, we have pivoted Suite Solutions product offering into a product-focused company called Zoomin, which helps companies bring their customers closer to content and the companies themselves closer to customers.

Today, I am excited to announce my new role as President and Head of Business Development at Zoomin.

SA: For those of our readers who aren't familiar with your company, tell us a little about Suite Solutions.

JG: Suite Solutions provides services to companies that are making the transition to structured authoring. We do a lot of projects involving the Darwin Information Typing Architecture (DITA), aviation maintenance documentation standards like ISPEC, and other formats. We primarily focus on stylesheet work, content conversion projects, and training and consulting. The idea has always been to provide a one-stop shop for companies to migrate to structured, topic-based content.

A few years into the business, we realized that there was a need for better publishing tools for Web-based formats and dynamic publishing. That's why we recently decided to shift the product side of the business into a company called Zoomin. We believe it's time to let customers get closer to content—via any touchpoint, across any device, or from any location. We also believe there is much to learn from the interactions that you provide your customers.

SA: Forward-thinking publishing experts say we are at a crossroads—the beginning of a new era of communication in which technical communicators and other content professionals are going to need to think differently about how we create, manage, and deliver content. Do you agree? Are we, finally, at the tipping point? And, if so, what do you think that means for professionals who craft content for a living?

JG: That's an excellent question, Scott. We are definitely at a crossroads. In the past, we thought in terms of output formats—PDF or online help or info centers. Today, we're thinking in terms of where our customers are interacting with us and making sure that our content is wherever they are, whenever they want or need to interact with it.

So instead of thinking in output formats, we need to shift our thinking to providing the best experience possible with our content. This allows us to turn our content from a necessary expense into an engagement enabler.

When we think about creating and managing content, we need to think not in terms of making a new user guide or a manual, but rather think of our users and how they will be using our content: What is their role? Who are they? What is their goal? What are they trying to achieve and in what context? And finally, what product are they using? What is their location? What is their level of experience?

Based on what we know about them, we should aim to serve up the right content—whether it be topics, videos, training modules—when and where they need it.

SA: You've been involved in helping companies make the move to advanced content management approaches for more than a decade now. What are the most valuable lessons you have learned from those experiences?

JG: First of all, transforming the way an organization manages content is not something you can bite off in one piece. The idea is to start building use-case scenarios around how customers are starting to use the content in specific scenarios and then, from there, build it out. In order to be successful, you have to be able to put yourself in your customer's shoes. Walk through the various phases of the customer lifecycle and imagine what information they need each step of the way. The content needed to turn a prospect into a customer is not the same content that's needed to help an existing customer find answers to their daily challenges or educate them on why they ought to upgrade to a new product or service.

I think a lot of companies bite the bullet and integrate content management and publishing tools without a clear idea of who is going to be consuming the content and how it needs to be designed. The idea is to start small and collect information and metrics on how people are using your content, and from there, make gradual improvements.

Another thing we've learned is that people have been talking about metadata and tagging your content for years. I'm always surprised—as much as companies invest in tools to get better metadata—that they aren't actually applying metadata to their content and are therefore not getting value out of the filtering and findability of their content. We've figured out an easy way for authors to tag their content, which, in turn, makes it easier for their customers to filter their content.

SA: Have you seen any adoption of structured content outside of the technical communication arena?

JG: Yes, structured content is being put to use beyond technical documentation. An increasing number of global companies are using structured, topic-based content outside of the documentation department. We're seeing more and more demand for structured content from marketing, training, and other departments. Everything from financial reports to blog posts are being structured. There are many types of content that benefit from being designed for reuse—making it more accessible and easier to find.

SA: Research shows that customers don't like the schizophrenic approach to content that most brands provide. They don't care which department is responsible for creating the content they encounter; they only care about whether that content serves their needs. When content is created in silos, there's a strong likelihood it's going to be incongruent—sound, look, and feel different depending on which department created it. Do you think that it's time to get all customer-facing content creators to work in the same way and, perhaps, to use the same suite of content production and management tools?

JG: In an ideal world, that would be great. But in the real world, companies have many different domains and ways of creating different types of content. Getting everyone onto one single platform is a pipe dream. However, that doesn't mean that all the content can't get delivered to the customer in a unified and consistent way.

So, that's what we want to focus on. Instead of trying to break down different silos and hit all sorts of political walls and force square pegs into round holes, the idea is to make sure that all of that content is going to be presented in a unified way. It really boils down to a few aspects.

Number one is to make sure that the content is classified in a consistent way, meaning that tech docs, marketing content, support content, training content, and community content should be tagged using a unified taxonomy with simple tools.

Number two is from an authoring point of view. There are tools that embed themselves into almost all the authoring tools out there that allow authors across different departments to keep consistent language and terminology, and that's something we definitely recommend wherever possible. When people arrive at a website, they want an answer as quickly as possible and this helps them.

SA: The technical communication sector has been divided for some time. On the one side there are those who handcraft single deliverables one at a time using desktop publishing and word processing tools. On the other side are the folks creating multiple deliverables simultaneously using intelligent content. Do you think marketing professionals are ready for the move to intelligent content? If so, why?

JG: Definitely, yes. If you drive down to what the definition of intelligent content is, I think the answer becomes very clear. Intelligent content essentially means component-based or topic-based content that is tagged with metadata to make it easily accessible.

Marketing professionals understand better than anyone else that people's attention spans are getting shorter and shorter. Marketing people also understand that the message needs to be clear, concrete, and brief. They also understand and have solved the issue of being able to understand who needs to see a particular message or a particular piece of content by using personas and scenarios. In essence, tagging the content is a way of doing exactly that and making it easily accessible to the right people.

Classifying content and using a unified taxonomy essentially means understanding the customer journey and personas that are going through the journey. Building a classification scheme that is going to push that content to the person based on who they are and what they want to do is the way that we can better serve our customers.

SA: When thinking about content, and the possibilities it provides us in the future, what are you most excited about?

JG: One of the things that I am most excited about is the potential of content-driven analytics. We need analytics to help us understand how people are consuming our content. Paying attention to the way people interact (or not) with our content allows us to make informed, data-driven business decisions. Content informs the customer journey. By understanding how people are using our content, we can gain key business insights about who our prospects and customers are and what they're interested in.

The simple analytics and metrics available to us today are insufficient. It's not enough to know how many people clicked on a link or on a certain page. We need much more comprehensive dashboards and analytics to get business insights on how people are using our content. I see a future in which analytics plays a key role in technical communication—and beyond.

SA: Joe, where can our readers learn more about you and your new publishing platform?

JG: Our website, of course (*www.zoominsoftware.com*). Or they can find me on Twitter *@zoominsoftware.*

SA: Thanks for making time to share your views with our readers. I really appreciate it.

JG: Thank you, Scott!

Known affectionately as "The Content Wrangler," SCOTT ABEL *is an internationally recognized global content strategist and intelligent content evangelist who specializes in helping organizations deliver the right content to the right audience, anywhere, anytime, on any device. Scott is the founder, CEO, and chief strategist at The Content Wrangler, Inc. (*https://thecontentwrangler.com*). He's also a highly sought after keynote presenter, moderator, and a frequent contributor to content industry publications. Scott's alter ego, The Audio Wrangler, is a popular DJ and dance music mashup artist.*

Tips for Great Presentations

BY NICKY BLEIEL | *Associate Fellow*

IN THIS INSTALLMENT of The Essentials, I cover several tips for successful conference or meeting presentations. With the Summit around the corner, these tips can help you develop your content, boost your confidence, and impress your audience. Many of these tips will also apply to work presentations.

Getting Started

A great presentation starts with planning and organization. The very first thing you should do is decide what you want the audience to learn about your topic, then make a list of what you need to cover to achieve that goal. One method you can use to organize your presentation is to write each point you want to cover on a sticky note, then group the related points together. From there, themes will emerge and you can develop your structure and flow. Use additional sticky notes for each chart and graphic you will need, as well as all your references. Now you are ready to build your slides.

Preparing Your Slides

It is a given that slides should not be a wall of words that compete for the audiences' attention, but there are other things to keep in mind when putting your slide deck together.

Using slide animations can be a good way to pace your delivery and keep the audience focused, but keep the effect you choose (for example, "fly in from the right") consistent and avoid anything distracting or dizzying. If your presentation is going to be broadcast, check with the organizers about using animations. Sometimes the animations will lag behind the audio and the remote audience will be out of sync with the live one. If you are advised to avoid animations, consider breaking your content up into additional slides. You can achieve the pace you want while making both audiences happy.

Photos can make your slides more interesting, but you should avoid using anything that is copyrighted. Two sources for photos: Flickr (search for those tagged with the "Commercial Use and Mods Allowed" license and follow the terms) at *flickr.com/explore* and the New York Public Library at *nypl.org/blog/2016/01/05/share-public-domain-collections.*

This column is a quick reference guide exploring "essential" technical communication topics. Please send questions or comments to Nicky Bleiel at *nableiel@us.ibm.com.* Follow her on Twitter: *@nickybleiel.*

If you create a chart by dropping individual shapes and objects onto a slide, make sure to "group" the objects when you are done so that they are a single unit. The resolution of the slide projector (or conferencing software) may change the layout so the chart won't appear as you intended, which will make it useless to the audience, and hurt your credibility.

Rehearsing and General Prep

Thorough preparation will give you confidence, and will also improve your presentation in a number of small but important ways. First of all, you must rehearse your presentation to confirm you don't have too much (or too little) content for the time allotted. Adjust your slides accordingly, and make sure to allow time for Q and A (if required).

If your presentation will include a live demo, run through it and jot down the steps. It is easy to skip important points, or cover unimportant ones, if you don't have your demo planned out. If you plan to use videos in your presentation, confirm with the conference organizers that there will be an audio jack available so the audio will play through the speakers.

The flow of your presentation is important. When rehearsing, write down logical verbal transitions between slides. If you can't segue smoothly between one slide and the next, you might need to adjust the flow of the presentation. After you have jotted down your transitions, you should add them (using Microsoft PowerPoint as an example) to the "Notes" area of your slides. Print out the "Notes Pages" for offline review.

If you are speaking in another country, or to a multicultural audience, be cognizant of any idioms that may slip in when you are rehearsing, and confirm that you haven't included anything potentially offensive or confusing in your content.

Lastly, think about what questions the audience may have, and make sure you are prepared to answer them.

After you have made your final slide tweaks, create a PDF version as a backup, in case there are issues with the projector or conferencing software. Upload both versions to the cloud, or save them on a flash drive in case there is a problem with your laptop the day of the presentation. If you prefer to use a presentation remote, make sure you pack one, as well as any adapters. You can't guarantee the venue will have everything you need.

The Day of Your Presentation

Make sure to eat. Skipping a meal because you are nervous may make you lightheaded, which will interfere with your focus. Avoid drinking soda.

Wear clothes and shoes you feel comfortable in, but that are appropriate for the event. Avoid wearing anything that will be distracting and take the focus away from your message. Remove your conference badge—it can shift around and the noise can get picked up by the microphone, plus you will look more professional, as will any photos taken of you at the event.

Arrive early so you have time to set up and get a feel for the room. If the preceding speaker gets caught up chatting with the audience after their time is up and their laptop is still on the podium, politely interrupt and ask them to move it. You want to make sure you have adequate time to set up without rushing.

Open up everything you will need for your presentation, including videos, websites, and demos. Plug in the audio jack and test the volume of your videos.

Bring a watch and place it on the podium. Commit the end time of your presentation to memory. Using "Presenter View" is another way to keep track of time unobtrusively.

If a microphone is available, use it, even if you believe you have a loud speaking voice. Don't take the risk that some audience members can't hear you.

Finally, right before you start, take a deep breath. Put a smile on your face and dive in.

During Your Presentation

Avoid making too many self-deprecating comments; never say you are nervous, sick, or tired—you will put it in the audience's minds and distract them from the topic. And never say that you just finished your slides. Of course, if you have followed these tips, there is no way this would be true, but even joking about it would imply to the audience and the conference organizers that you did not prepare.

When it is time for Q and A, make sure that you don't spend too much time on one question. If a question is too detailed or specific, offer to answer it after the session or over email.

Remember: No matter what happens (blue screens, projector problems, etc.), keep talking as you work to solve the issues. The audience will appreciate your perseverance and you won't waste their time. This is where your thorough rehearsal, slide notes, and a flash drive backup can save the day.

Best of luck with your presentation!

NICKY BLEIEL is a Watson Information Developer at IBM. She has given almost 100 conference presentations and webinars, and is a past president of STC with over 20 years of experience writing and designing content for software products in a variety of industries. See nickybleiel.com *for a list of her talks, articles, and interviews.*

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Berkun, Scott. *Confessions of a Public Speaker.* O'Reilly Media, 2009.

Duarte, Nancy. *slide:ology: The Art and Science of Creating Great Presentations* . O'Reilly Media, 2008. (Also check out her TED talk "The Secret Structure of Great Talks.")

Gallo, Carmine. *The Presentation Secrets of Steve Jobs: How to Be Insanely Great in Front of Any Audience.* McGraw-Hill Education, 2009.

Mark Your Calendar

Organization Events Across the Globe

F.Y.I. lists information about nonprofit ventures only. Please send information to *intercom@stc.org.*

1 11–15 Feb
The 2016 **American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS)** Annual Meeting will take place at the Washington Marriott Wardman Park in Washington, DC. The theme is "Global Science Engagement." For more information, contact:
AAAS
+1 (202) 326-6450
meetings@aaas.org
http://meetings.aaas.org

2 1-2 Apr
The **STC New England Chapter** hosts the annual InterChange conference at the UMass Lowell Conference Center in Lowell, MA. For more information, contact:
STC New England
interchange@stcnewengland.org
www.stcnewengland.org

3 6 Apr
The 2016 **Association of Teachers of Technical Writing (ATTW)** Annual Conference will take place at the Hilton of the Americas in Houston, TX. The theme is "Citizenship and Advocacy in Technical Communication." For more information, contact:
ATTW
http://attw.org/conference/
Conference co-chairs
Godwin Agboka,
agbokag@uhd.edu
Natalia Matveeva,
matveevan@uhd.edu

4 2 Apr
The **Conduit 2016: Connecting Minds – The Mid-Atlantic TechComm Conference** will be held at the Giant Conference Center in Willow Grove, PA. For more information, contact:
STC – Philadelphia Metro Chapter
conference@stcpmc.org.
http://www.stcpmc.org/

5 7-10 Apr
The **Association of Independent Information Professionals (AIIP)** will hold its annual conference from 7–10 April at the Omni William Penn Hotel in Pittsburgh, PA. For more information, visit:
AIIP
http://www.aiip.org/conference

6 8–10 Apr
The 2016 **International Society for Performance Improvement** Annual Conference will take place at the Loews Philadelphia Hotel in Philadelphia, PA. For more information, contact:
ISPI
+1 (301) 587-8570
info@ispi.org
http://ispi.org

7 4–8 May
The **American Society for Information Science and Technology (ASIS&T)** will hold the IA Summit in Atlanta, GA. For more information, contact:
ASIS&T
asis@asis.org
http://www.iasummit.org/events/ias2016

8 15–18 May
The **Society for Technical Communication** will host its 63rd Annual Summit at the Anaheim Marriott in Anaheim, CA. For more information, contact:
STC
+1 (703) 522-4114
http://summit.stc.org/conference/

9 15–18 June
The 2016 **American Society for Indexing** Annual Conference will take place at the Conference Chicago University Center in Chicago, IL. For more information, contact:
ASI
+1 (480) 245-6750
info@asindexing.org
http://www.asindexing.org/conference-2016/

* STC-related event

Speak Plainly … But Not *Too* Plainly

BY GEOFF HART | *Fellow*

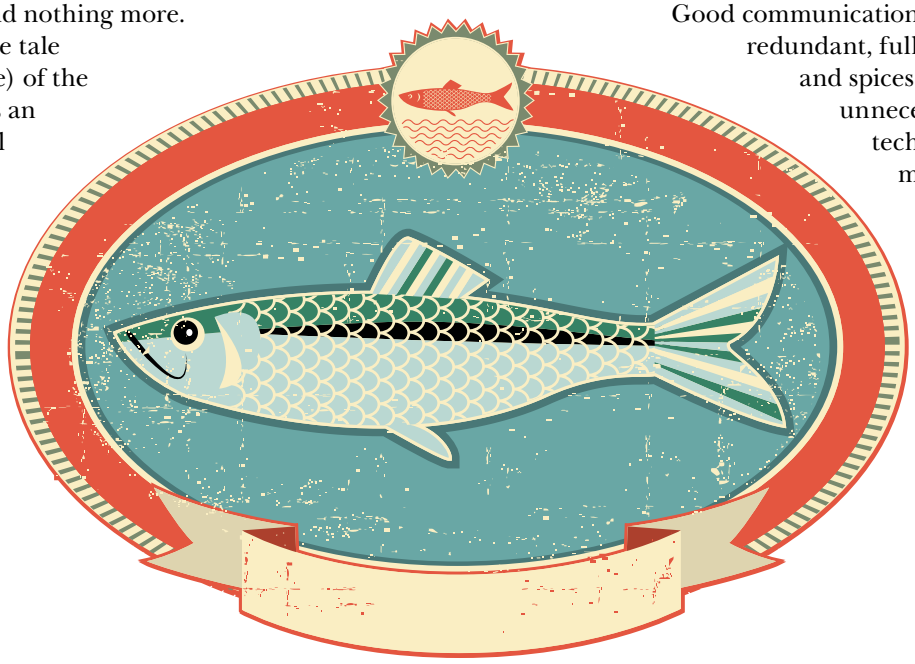
THE PLAIN SPEECH MOVEMENT arose in reaction to the vast mass of words each of us confronts daily, much of it incomprehensible—often deliberately so, as in insurance policies and cell phone plans. The problem is not limited to text, however, as anyone who browses the Web knows. Although Adobe's online animation tool may have been named "Flash" based on the eponymous noun, the quality of most information presented in Flash format suggests the name works better as an adjective: *ostentatious*. To borrow from Shakespeare, too much Flash content is nothing more than "a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing." In its archaic sense, *flash* relates to thieves and their language. The archaic sense is appropriate, since so much Flash content does little more than steal our time.

Though I mock, this reminds us we must not steal time from our audience, lest we become no better than those we mock. What, then, is a technical communicator to do? Use words judiciously, keeping the advice of William of Ockham, best known for the principle Occam's razor, as our guide: "make it as simple as possible, but no simpler." The difficulty lies in defining *simple*; the solution lies in understanding what an audience needs to understand, and providing that and nothing more.

Leo Rosten tells the tale (which I'll paraphrase) of the shopkeeper who hires an editor to help him sell his seafood more economically by reducing the size of the sign, thereby reducing signage costs. The editor's task is to boil the message "fresh fish for sale daily" to its irreducible minimum. "Eliminate *daily*," says the editor, since the fish could hardly be fresh if it were not sold daily. For that matter, eliminate "fresh," since customers would never return if a merchant sold fish that was well past its sell-by date. The need to describe the fish as "for sale" seems unclear. After all, what shopkeeper would display a window full of fish as an *objet d'art*? This leaves the lonely word "fish," which could surely be eliminated, since even the uneducated will recognize the nature of the finned and scaled meat displayed in the shop's window. Although the resulting wordless image might be a boon to the illiterate, and arguably represents effective minimalist visual communication, something seems lacking.

Although one should never obfuscate, sometimes it's better to use a pricier word such as *obfuscate* than a cheaper but longer and less precise phrase. To paraphrase Mark Twain, the difference between the right word and the wrong word is the difference between fire and a firefly. Similarly, although jargon has acquired a bad reputation, the advice to eschew jargon oversimplifies. *Good* jargon communicates effectively with audiences that understand it; *bad* jargon obfuscates by privileging words the audience does not know or can only parse with difficulty.

Thus, we reach the moral of our story: Speak your truth plainly and clearly. Just not *too* plainly and clearly. Good communication is inherently redundant, full of padding and spices that may be unnecessary in purely technical terms, but that make the message more palatable. Sacrificing these aspects for the sake of concision risks creating pabulum so bland that none heeds its eminently comprehensible message. i



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